

ENGLISH LEARNERS AND THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Background for the Californians Together “Raise Your Voice for English Learners in the Common Core Standards” Toolkit

New Common Core Standards have been voluntarily adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia as a shared benchmark defining college and career readiness in English Language Arts and Mathematics. These rigorous standards articulate high expectations for students, and will drive a new era in curriculum, teaching pedagogy and assessments in California and nation-wide. Full implementation is expected in the 2014-15 school year.

Californians Together views the advent of the Common Core Standards as an opportunity to strengthen the schooling of English Learners, by providing the framework for a rigorous education that will prepare them (as all students) for the 21st century. We also recognize that any reform that increases rigor and does not address how English Learners will be supported to master that rigor can exacerbate the barriers and achievement gaps that have characterized the education of English Learners for too long. To ensure that the Common Core is implemented in way that fully includes English Learners and that meets their unique language development and access needs, we have prepared the following talking points for use by our member organizations and representatives to use in dialogues at the local, district and state levels – raising concerns, pushing for the supports needed to realize the Common Core for English Learners, and advancing the vision of English Learner education that the Common Core can make possible.

#1. THE OPPORTUNITIES IN THE COMMON CORE

The Common Core Standards support many aspects of what we know to be research-based strategies needed for English Learners, and open the door for implementation of powerful approaches that have been difficult to implement in the past.

- A. The Common Core Standards call for attention to literacy and language across the curriculum both as subject and vehicle for learning. They call upon all academic content teachers to focus more explicitly upon the vocabulary, oral language and discourse patterns so essential to participation in academic work – and so foundational to the development of language among English Learners. As a result, all teachers (not just ELD teachers) will need an understanding of literacy and language, and the strategies to promote active engagement with language in the classroom.
- B. The Common Core Standards call for collaboration and teamwork as a key component of instruction, and recognize that students need to develop the skills for collaborative engagement in academic work. (e.g., *Anchor Standard #1 Speaking and Listening*). This understanding of the role of “language in action” opens the door for more project-based and inquiry-based teaching and learning, the active use of language in the context of inquiry and collaborative work, and for the integration of the 4C’s: communication, collaboration, critical thinking, creativity.
- C. The Common Core Standards include language standards for all students, with a focus not just on the conventions of language, but how language functions in different contexts, choices about uses of language, etc. This elevates the study OF language to new levels. In a linguistically diverse society, and for students who encounter and move through multiple language communities, this enhanced focus on language itself is an important development.

#2. CONCERNS ABOUT ENGLISH LEARNER NEEDS THAT ARE MISSING IN THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

- A. The Common Core Standards assume all students have a basic level of English proficiency. The standards call for students to be engaged, for example, in close reading of academic texts, to be able to construct and deliver (speaking and in writing) effective arguments, to be able to identify a speakers' key points and elaborate on those ideas in group settings, etc. These are sophisticated language skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing. Yet there is no provision for building the basic foundation in English needed by students who are English Learners. English Learners face the double challenge of learning English and acquiring the more complex academic language skills and academic content in and through a language they don't yet know. The Common Core Standards do not speak to the study OF English as a second language or to how English Learners will acquire the foundational English they need. Despite the focus on language in the Common Core Standards for all students, the standards don't attend to the foundation of language in the communicative, expressive and social domains needed by a second language learner – and the aspects of the English language that are known by native English speakers. It has been left up to states to develop their own English Language Proficiency standards. The guidance and expectation is that states will backwards map from the Common Core English Language Arts standards to ensure the scaffolds needed for English Learners. That is important, but is not enough. English Learners will require standards that attend to the full foundation of language skills and English Language Development needed by someone for whom English is a second language.
- B. The Common Core Standards are wholly defined in terms of relevance to college and career readiness. They do not address other realms of “relevance” so essential for young people to develop in the 21st century – and especially important for English Learners and other cultural and linguistic minority students. The purposes of education for all students should embrace identity development, empathy and cultural connection and understanding. Without these being attended to, motivation and engagement suffer, and important knowledge and aspects of human development are not addressed. Workforce preparation for the 21st century, diverse and global world should include a focus on the competencies of intercultural communication and biliteracy. While the Common Core Standards set out some skills relevant to college and career readiness – it is important (at least here in California) that education attend to the broader set of skills, competencies and relevance students will need.
- C. Superintendent Torlakson's Blueprint for Great Schools calls for biliteracy for all students. While not an explicit goal of the Common Core Standards, in California, this requires a multilingual approach to the Common Core. The intentional focus on language in the Common Core would be more fully realized if students study two or more languages.
- D. The Common Core Standards define skills and competencies, and is neutral with regards to the setting, program or language on instruction in which those skills and competencies are taught. The Standards by themselves are not adequate as guidance for delivery in the different programmatic contexts for English Learners (e.g., dual language immersion, biliteracy programs). They must be supplemented with standards and objectives related to language transfer, contrastive analysis, skills of translation, and the learning opportunities present when students are studying in and across two languages.

#3. CRUCIAL ISSUES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The Common Core Standards are simply standards. Whether and how English Learners are provided the supports needed to access and master those standards will be a function of how the standards are implemented – at the state and local levels.

- A. The Common Core Standards represent significantly ramped up rigor from our current standards and practices. The language and literacy demands are high. Currently many English Learners are not achieving even the low-bar of CELDT proficiency or the academic language needed for redesignation. The focus on academic language has been inadequate, the provision of ELD has been generally weak statewide, and both teaching and curriculum materials have been insufficient for moving English Learners to the levels of English needed for successful academic engagement. To ramp up instruction to get English Learners to the bar of linguistic complexity called for in the Common Core Standards will require a major intensification, strengthening and focus on English Language development and scaffolding strategies across the curriculum to provide English Learners access to the Common Core.
- B. The Common Core Standards imply engagement with more complex text. Common practices now include relegating English Learners to much simplified text. Implementation of the Common Core will require both investment in materials that more appropriately provide the scaffold into academic rigorous text, and changes in teaching practices so that students are provided support for engaging with more complex text.
- C. The Common Core Standards position academic language development within the study of history, social science and academic disciplines. The prevalent practices in California schools have greatly narrowed the curriculum that English Learners receive to just language arts and math – without the social studies, science, history and arts that build the necessary background knowledge to engage with academic text. English Learners will need instruction that builds the background knowledge needed to comprehend the references, cultural knowledge and academic concepts in more rigorous and complex text. Time needs to be spent in the curriculum building background knowledge. We cannot assume that English Learners have that knowledge. The Common Core requires that we take the time to build it, end the narrowing of the curriculum and ensure English Learners receive a full curriculum.
- D. The Common Core Standards are dense. One standard frequently requires multiple language demands that must be focused upon. Teachers of English Learners, faced with the multi-layered standards will have to unpack each standard for its linguistic demands, and then prioritize and sequence the parts – making decisions about key power aspects of the standards.
- E. The Common Core Standards do not address the issue of the student's level of English proficiency. They don't define or build in the scaffolds to address the needs of English Learners. This means that access to the Common Core will rely upon quality professional development for teachers on scaffolding, differentiation, and pacing accommodations for the different levels of English proficiency. Many people apparently perceive that English Language Development standards represent a lowering of the rigor of the Common Core standards, and there is pervasive inadequate understanding of the importance of scaffolding for English Learners. Although professional papers call for addressing the complexity of the Common Core for English Learners by pacing accommodations, there is little guidance about what this implies. We are concerned that instead of providing appropriate scaffolding, differentiated strategies and pacing for English Learners, the response will be placing them into interventions and over-remediation.

- F. The English Language Development Standards that will align to the Common Core will clearly be a critical component of addressing English Learner needs. However, the widespread roll-out and focus on the Common Core Standards is occurring now without the ELD standards and without explanation about the role and relationship of those ELD standards to the Common Core. We are concerned that the ELD standards will be overshadowed, unknown and unimplemented. This is a matter of leadership. It is crucial that state leadership and professional leadership underscore the importance of the ELD standards and provide guidance and monitoring to ensure they will be understood and implemented as a core element of English Learner education in the state.
- G. Linguistic complexity in the Common Core assessment is very likely to be an issue and present a barrier to English Learners being able to demonstrate what they know. It is essential that the new assessments control for linguistic complexity and be sure the computer adaptability controls for it.
- H. For valid and reliable results, and to ensure accountability for English Learner achievement of the Common Core, the new assessment/accountability system must continue a focus on English Learners as a subgroup and include measures of performance and progress in English Language Proficiency. Data on English Learner achievement must be analyzed by the number of years an English Learner has been in our schools so we can monitor for the development of Long Term English Learners. Finally, we need a primary language assessment for both math and Language Arts.
- I. Bilingual programs, an effective and important program option for English Learners, will only remain an option if the state and districts adopt primary language materials for implementing the Common Core, and if the state develops primary language assessments. There is danger that the advent of the Common Core could spell another deathblow to bilingual education options without adequate materials and assessments.
- J. Teachers are absolutely key to making the implementation of the Common Core Standards a reality for English Learners. It appears that the Common Core rollout and planning are occurring by Districts, county offices and providers with little input from teachers about the implications for instruction, the supports needed to pull off the transition, and the kind of professional development that will make it possible for teachers to teach the Common Core Standards. Meaningful and well-designed professional development needs to be rolled out statewide that focus on scaffolding access, differentiating instruction, working with the linguistic demands of academic text, and developing language across the curriculum. Highly effective training empowers teachers rather than scripting. It includes coaching, lesson study for change of behavior, and is based upon the science of implementation.
- K. The Common Core Standards call for demanding and complex text that pose higher hurdles for English Learners. The state needs to plan for English Learner accessibility and scaffolded text, and ensure the availability of supplementary materials including more of a focus on oral and written language.
- L. The Common Core Assessment needs to incorporate assessment of skills of the 4 Cs (creativity, collaboration, critical thinking and communication). These are skills that are incorporated into the standards, but less likely to be incorporated into assessment. In professional development as well as assessment, it is essential that there be leadership and active voices keeping these crucial 21st century skills on the table.
- M. The Common Core Standards call for uses of digital technology as a skill in research and presentation. English Learners are a population with disproportionately limited access and familiarity with digital technology – and disproportionately attend schools with limited technology. Access to the Common Core requires a Technology Plan to address the disparities and the digital divide.

IMPORTANT RESOURCES:

California Department of Education Common Core State Standards Resources web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cc/>.

California Department of Education English Language Development Standards web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/eldstandards.asp>

California Department of Education A Blueprint for Great Schools Report web page at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/bp/bpcontents.asp>

California Department of Education, *Improving Education for English Learners: Research-Based Approaches*, CDE Press: Sacramento, CA (2010).

California Department of Education, *A Look at Kindergarten through Grade Six in Public Schools: Transitioning to the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Mathematics*. California Department of Education, Sacramento (2011)

The Purpose of English Language Proficiency Standards, Assessments, and Instruction in an Age of New Standards: Policy Statement from the Understanding Language Initiative. Stanford University, April 2012.

Stanford University Understanding Language web page at <http://ell.stanford.edu/>